

Covid-19 And University Education: A Qualitative Study On Academic Experiences In A Faith-Based Institution In Nigeria

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ABSTRACT

Background: The Corona virus 2019 (COVID-19) outbreak spread rapidly with strenuous impact on teaching-learning delivery in all tiers of education globally. It resulted in a change from a face-to-face traditional teaching and learning system to virtual type, thus affecting teaching and assessment mode during the period. This study explored experiences of university administrators, teachers, students, and the software developers during transition to the virtual and hybrid mode.

Method: The study followed a qualitative, descriptive phenomenological approach. A constructivist paradigm was applied. In-depth interviews were conducted face to face and through telephone with 4 administrators, 5 lecturers, 5 students and 2 software developer of virtual teaching method in a faith-based university in Nigeria. A thematic method of data analysis was followed to analyse the audio recorded interviews.

Findings: The following themes emerged from the analysis: (1) Fear/anxiety and doubts of online teaching during the COVID-19 pandemic; (2) Self-efficacy among all stakeholders; (3) Availability and Accessibility of the resource – internet, software and power supply; (4) Assessment of the online teaching and students' evaluation during the COVID-19 pandemic; (5) Funding of the online teaching; (6) Challenges of online teaching during the COVID-19 pandemic – students' engagement, network issues, acceptability of online education by parents and students.

Conclusion and recommendations: The study's findings indicated that in spite of the emotional, physical, and financial challenges faced during the transition, Babcock University was able to adopt the hybrid teaching mode without significant abruption to the academic calendar because available technological facilities were immediately expanded and trainings conducted for seamless transition.

Key words: COVID-19, online teaching, pandemic, university education

INTRODUCTION

The COVID-19 outbreak caused disruptions in the educational system globally and health issues that have been particularly challenging for international health systems to handle. This is clear from the voids left by the global spread of the Corona virus pandemic in the educational system, particularly the harm it has done to students from low socioeconomic backgrounds who have been unable to learn since the outbreak. Even though the corona virus pandemic is new, humanity is already suffering from its harmful impacts. No country or race on earth is currently immune to the Corona virus epidemic, and the speed of its spread and its catastrophic effects seem to be overwhelming the entire planet. This is distressing since the Corona virus pandemic knows no boundaries and has a swift and severe impact. Just a few months after the sickness first

appeared, it had already profoundly altered global lifestyles, forcing billions of people to "stay at home," "observe self-isolations," and conduct work and school from their homes. The ability of people to move, trade, or interact freely has been restricted.

The COVID-19 pandemic had a significant negative influence on education resulting in the closing down of schools worldwide. The school closure had effect on 94% of the world's student population (Habler, 2020) causing severe disturbances in the educational systems globally. More than 39,440,016 primary and secondary school students in Nigeria were impacted, including those enrolled in higher education and those living in camps for internally displaced people (Maitanmi, 2020). Majority of institutions were not prepared for the challenges.

Prior to the pandemic, Nigeria was experiencing a crisis in the educational sector with more than 13.2 million Nigerian children and youth of primary and secondary school age not enrolled in school (UNESCO, 2020) other challenges include high dropout rates and learning impairment resulting in Nigeria falling short of the SDG 4.

Very little research has been conducted, especially in developing countries, to gain an in-depth understanding of the experience of university administrators, teachers and students during the COVID-19 pandemic. This study was therefore conducted to understand how the various stakeholders navigated during the transition and to harmonize the lessons learnt during the process for possible educational transformation and blended learning

METHODS AND MATERIALS

Research Design: This study investigated the academic experiences of stakeholders (students, lecturers and university administrators) on university education during the emergence of Covid-19 at Babcock University Ilishan-Remo, Ogun State, Nigeria. The design of this study is based on the recommendations of Merriam (2015). Merriam (2015) recommended the use of qualitative research when the research is focused on particular experiences and the meaning behind the experiences. The qualitative research design lends itself to the collection of rich descriptive data, specific recollection of activities, and participants' perceptions during the interviews.

Sample and Sampling Procedure: The study being qualitative, it was necessary to select a sample that would enable the phenomenon under study to be explored for better understanding. Creswell (2012) argues that selecting a large number of interviewees in a qualitative case study could result in a superficial perspective and the overall ability of a researcher to provide an in-depth picture diminish with the addition of each new individual or site. The researchers aimed to assess the multiple perspectives of the interviewees with different providers (university administrator and the software developer of virtual teaching method), users (teachers) and receivers (students), about the impact of the virtual teaching mode during the emergence of covid-19. Therefore, choosing a maximal variations sampling strategy, a purposive sampling procedure was employed to build this complexity into the study. According to Kusi (2012), a maximal variation sampling strategy is a purposive sampling strategy in which the researcher samples cases or individuals that differ on some characteristics or traits. The procedure requires that the researcher identifies the characteristics and the sites or individuals that display different dimensions of the characteristics. This study, therefore, selected 3 undergraduates (15%), 6 postgraduates (30%), 3 lecturers (15%), 4 developers (20%), and 4 university administrators (20%) to respond to the semi-structured interviews.

Data Collection Instrument: Information for this study was gathered through the use of face-to-face interviews with the university administrators, software developers, lecturers and students. All the interview guides were pilot-tested. The pilot-testing of the instrument led to the revision and modification of some items on the interview guides. This helped to fine-tune the instruments before using them for the main study.

Data Processing and Analysis: A transcript of recorded interviews was prepared for the analysis, using descriptive language. Data were transcribed and thematic analysis was used for data analysis.

RESULTS AND FINDINGS

Table 1: Characteristics of the participants

Participants	N	%
1 Undergraduates (UDS)	3	15
2 Postgraduates (PGS)	6	30
3 Developers (DV)	4	20
4 Lecturers(LT)	3	15
5 University administrators (UA)	4	20
Total	20	100

There were 20 participants that were engaged in the interview process, three undergraduate students (15%), three lecturers (15%), six postgraduate students (30%), four developers (20%), and four university administrators (20%).

Table 2: Themes and subthemes

<i>THEMES</i>	<i>SUB-THEMES</i>
1. Confidence that BU would be able to transit easily to virtual classes	Perception Doubts/confidence Fear/Anxiety
2. The required facilities to successfully transit to virtual	Internet Software Power supply - electricity
3. BU's ability to transit to online platforms during the pandemic	Self-efficacy Sustenance Adequate transition
4. Administration and extra fund to upgrade to the online classes	Fund availability Fund adequacy Readiness
5. Assessment	Online formative assessment Online summative assessment
6. Challenges encountered while transiting to online	Acceptability of online classes Students' class engagement Network issues/data consumption Power supply

Six themes were identified from the collected data. Themes were formulated by grouping the meanings of the statements according to their description of the participant's experience. Sub-themes were developed to support the themes. The researchers went back to the participants with the analyzed interviews to confirm if the researchers had correctly captured their thoughts and experiences. The participants were assigned pseudonyms to maintain confidentiality.

THEME 1: BU's ability to transit easily to virtual classes (online platforms) during the pandemic

Subtheme 1.1: Perception

I believe the University responded to the physical restrictions occasioned by the pandemic with the transition to online teaching just in time. While many universities were still grappling with the reality of the pandemic, Babcock University was foresighted enough to quickly adopt online teaching as the way to go. It was commendable that the University, right after the period of national lockdown, organised training sessions on the use of online platforms (mainly Google classroom and Edmodo) for both teachers and students.

It was a good initiative. The transition was a good idea that helped BU to maintain its academic calendar to a great extent.

It was swift and timely. However, challenges ensued due to network issues, insufficient data, and mastery of the online platform. For the earlier part of the period it was a tough ride but eventually, we got more used to and comfortable with the system.

There was the immediate skepticism about the practicality of transition for classroom to online

The transition was a welcome idea since there has been calls and plans before covid emergence to digital in teaching

The unforeseen shutdown of schools due to the COVID-19 outbreak, which halted physical education activities, was discouraging and frustrating, "A never to believe situation". Owing to the fact that Babcock University keeps assiduously her academic calendar.

I felt challenged to rise above the effect that the pandemic will have on the University. We started thinking outside the box to see how to continue running the University onsite of the pandemic.

Subtheme 1.2: confidence

It was all a sudden and shocking reality that the Covid-19 pandemic came and destabilized the traditional way of teaching, research output, and presentations. At that material time it was not clear what we were to do or even think. But after a month of staying home, since classes were abruptly halted in the middle of the semester, we needed to come together and brainstorm so as to come up with a workable plan. As a developing university, we were not ready for virtual classes, but as the saying goes: necessity is the mother of invention. Thus it became a must that we moved to online teaching. The leadership of the University took a bold and firm decision to complete the semester by going online. It was a tough decision due to financial challenges and limited technological know-how on the part of all of us.

There was uncertainty. The transition was not envisaged to be easy and smooth since nothing like that has been done in the past on that scale

Because of the University Administration's commitment to educational best practices for quality education and high investment in IT department already in place, I was convinced that Babcock University would readily transition to virtual learning.

The confidence was low

I was fairly confident because we had made ICT literacy as part of our culture at BU

Subtheme 1.3: Doubts/Fear/Anxiety

At the beginning I was sure that BU had the required facilities to successfully transit to virtual, Yes! Upon take off, fear raised with reality.

It was very fearful.

I wasn't sure our existing facilities could carry a transition to online.

The above theme dealt with the BU's ability to transit easily to virtual classes (online platforms) during the pandemic. It was found that BU responded to the physical restrictions occasioned by the pandemic with the transition to online teaching just in time and the transition was a good idea that helped BU to maintain its academic calendar to a great extent. Babcock University was foresighted enough to quickly adopt online teaching as the way to go, which was swift and timely. Though, the transition was with mixed feelings of confidence, doubts, fear and anxiety. At the earlier part of the period, it was a tough ride but eventually, we got used to and comfortable with the system.

It could be deduced that what increased the hope of Babcock University was the fact that the students have been trained on the use of the intranet before the emergence of covid-19, thus, to navigate through was not difficult. Also, the transition was a welcome idea since there was initial calls and plans before COVID-19 emergence to digitalize the teaching.

THEME 2: The required facilities to successfully transit to virtual

Subtheme 2.1: Internet/ICT/Laptop

From investments made on ICT facilities even without the threat of Covid-19 and the need for virtual classes, Babcock had the required facilities. With Covid-19, there was only need for some few adjustments and upgrades to meet up with the challenge. Babcock was not caught unawares.

At some point, my personal laptops develop a fault. With me not having been furnished with an official laptop by the University (since I got employed in 2019 till date), I had to resort to the use of my phone to teach my classes online.

Yes, we do have the resources needed. Though there were a number of hiccups at the beginning with the servers, connectivity issues, distributions and load balancer, among others.

The outcome of Theme 2 was on the assurance whether BU had the required facilities to successfully transit to virtual teaching. It was found from the interview reports of the respondents that Babcock University to a very large extent has all the necessary facilities (personnel and non-personnel resources) needed for the transition from traditional classroom teaching and learning to virtual.

Theme 3: BU's ability to transit to online platforms during the pandemic

Subtheme 3.1: Self-efficacy

There was the challenge of getting used to the class room platforms to be used. Through constant learning and use I was able to use the preferred one, Google Classroom for classes.

Babcock University was the first university in Nigeria to introduce online teaching soon after students left campus on account of the Covid-19 pandemic. Again, BU was the first university to provide all lecturers with sufficient data to support online teaching. More so, we were the first university to conduct online examination, online graduation and to closes the school year successfully in the heat of the pandemic. Yes, we were confident of the possibility and success of the transition from traditional in-person teaching to the online mode of teaching. We totally depended on God, and we did our job. The Leadership of the University gathered the ICT experts and they evaluated the facilities available and gave their report. Yes, we had the required facilities to successfully transit to virtual. Then the President/Vice Chancellor, after extensive and exhaustive consultations with all stakeholders and users, gave the marching order.

Subtheme 3.2: Sustenance

It was the best available decision to take. At that period, it was about survival, safety, and compliance with preventable measures to shield the university community from the threat of the spread of the virus should physical classes begin.

At the earlier period, lack of mastery of the management of the platform, and network issues

Theme 4: Administration and extra fund to upgrade to the online classes

Subtheme 4.1: Fund availability and adequacy

Obviously, the administration made additional investments to that effect.

The university administration spent extra fund to upgrade to the online classes

Yes, the administration spent extra money during the period on some facilities including foreign currency spending.

Yes, considerable amount of money was spent

Subtheme 4.2: Readiness

For Babcock, some facilities were purchased. For example, Google Meet, Edmodo, Zoom, and others were licensed and of course that needed some funding. Departments also purchased zoom lines for seminar purposes. It was a huge success.

Theme 5: Assessment

Subtheme 5.1: Online assessment (Formative and Summative)

I am of the opinion that Babcock was successful with the online classes. Issues of virtual examinations supervision however arose. But satisfactorily, the university achieved much in view of the fact that about two academic sessions were successfully completed virtually.

Class assessment and monitoring class progress were herculean task at this period

Theme 6: Challenges encountered while transiting to online

Subtheme 6.1: Acceptability of online classes

Inconsistency from both parents and students towards acceptability and adaptability of the virtual learning method

Old faculty members that were not competent in ICT

Subtheme 6.2: Students' class engagement

The challenges have to do with student attitude to class activities. It was discovered that some students will just log in and be doing something else, thereby not paying attention to class activities. I have to constantly be monitoring and calling students names for participation. Another challenge was power supply and network stability. I have to be changing from one service provider to another to ensure consistent connection.

There was the initial process of adjusting and learning how to make use of the online platforms for effective teaching. Afterwards, it became a seamless process exporting and adapting the traditional classroom teaching experience to online teaching platforms in maximising new opportunities to engage my students.

It was challenging engaging the students and ensuring that the attention to class activities is maintained.

It was a smooth ride personally. It brought in a whole new different perspective and dimension. However, attendance in class, class management, monitoring the progress of the students, class assessments was a little challenging.

Class engagement and management is so difficult to achieve.

Subtheme 6.3: Network issues/data consumption

There was the challenge of regular and stable internet connectivity. The ICT responded to reports and regularly attended to issues as reported.

Some of the challenges experienced were unstable internet connectivity, high consumption of mobile data

A lot of logistics challenges, system breakdown, network issues

Not completely. We had significant facilities to support it but we also made up our minds to supplement what we had. The only concern then was network which was beyond our control e.g network providers like MTN

Unstable network from the Internet providers

Data insufficiency

Subtheme 6.4: Power supply

Unstable power supply

Erratic power supply

Epileptic power supply

Erratic power supply disrupted classes

In Africa and to be specific, Nigeria's electricity supply is a bit below average. We experienced erratic power supply disrupted classes while most times, the practical classes were postponed to a later time when electricity supply would be available.

Solutions/Prospects

Problems were mitigated through consultation with ICT experts outside BU and Administration willingness to swiftly embrace several IT options; involvement and commitment of the principal officers with routine supervision; constant, regular, and intervals meetings (nights and days) of all the stakeholders; hands on the deck; and above all PRAYER, and FAITH in GOD!

BU was able to braze the trail and to the glory of God, BU was able to keep the school running during the challenging time.

Constant training of staff and students, Upgrade of electricity supply, and Updating of ICT facilities

DISCUSSIONS

The study explored the academic experiences of students, lecturers, developers, and administrators during the COVID-19 era and the way forward in Nigerian education system. The major findings highlighted the benefits and challenges experienced during the shift in teaching and evaluation. The shift experienced a number of disruptions, such as amendment of academic calendar, reduction of productivity and the limitation of hands-on practical training such as Students Industrial Work Experience Scheme (SIWES), physical workshops and conferences.

It was mentioned as part of the report that a number of students did not like the approach of online studies emphasized by the teachers, this is supported by the findings of Amir et al (2020). Amir et al (2020) found out that most students disliked online classes and about 60% thought communication was more difficult with the online learning which resulted in a dissatisfaction level.

Our findings were also similar to the research of Tinto (1987) though staled, but relevant. He mentioned that perceived academic difficulties could endanger students with retention in higher education. The perceived difficulty they may experience here was the sudden shift of method which they were not familiar with. Some other challenges mentioned by few of our students was the house chores which they were mandated to carry out even though they were at home to study this is similar to the research of Hagedorn et al., (2021); Ipe et al., (2021); Staniscuaski et al., (2021) who highlighted the social activities that female students went through during the pandemic. Such social responsibilities include cooking, cleaning, and childcare, among others.

CONCLUSION

The study looked qualitatively at the impact of the virtual teaching mode on the university administrator, teachers, students, as well as the software developer of virtual teaching method during the covid-19 epidemic. It was discovered that all the aforementioned stakeholders face a number of difficulties, including but not limited to initial lack of faith in the program, inability to connect to the internet when necessary, and insufficient understanding of the used technology.

The advantages, however, far outweigh these difficulties. The sustainability of the students was a significant achievement, as was the maintenance of the academic calendar. The costs associated with printing exam materials were also reduced, and the university benefited greatly from the acquisition of new information technology skills by both students and faculty. As previously noted, COVID-19 has contributed to a variety of improvements and developments throughout the world, particularly in Nigeria. Therefore, it is advised that National Universities Commission embrace the advantages added to the educational institutions and look past the COVID-19 problems. Therefore, the NUC should approve the universities that have the staff and the technology motivation to operate in mixed or blended mode in Nigeria.

RECOMMENDATIONS

There should be a deliberate effort to sustain the educational development that occurred with proactive online self-learning open courses that academic and non-academic staff went through during the lock down. This will prepare the country for future occurrences. In an attempt to achieve this, there are quite a number of issues, policies and human factors to put in place.

It has become obvious that technology can drive education faster and more efficient than the manual method of teaching. Technology powered assessment tools are set to become the future of assessment (Oldfield et al., 2012). These tools have the abilities to provide immediate feedback, increase efficiency of teaching, reduce teacher's workloads, and integrate formative and summative assessments, among others.

The qualified teachers or lecturers would have to update themselves on various certification courses apart from the mandatory degrees in order to be qualified to move technologically with the tides of time. Such required certifications may include; Learning Management Systems (LMSs) software such as Google classroom, Microsoft Team, EdApp, Atutors, Its learning, among others. While available Video Conferencing are Zoom, Google Hangouts, Dialpad Meetings, TrueConf Online, Skype, among others. Some of these applications are free while others are proprietary (Pearson, 2018).

Government policies are very important drive-in education. The National Universities Commission (NUC) will have to recognize and certify universities with the capabilities and technological strengths to run blended mode of education in Nigeria. It is a fact that challenges of epileptic power and Internet supply exist but without trying, it will be difficult to grow.

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